



His students, he said, learned about his reprimand and devised a plan to help.

“They went to the Salvation Army and purchased a bunch of gaudy ties and a big frame with a glass front to put them in,” he said. “Attached was a note: ‘In case of emergency, break glass.’” The gift, presented to Gordon at a pep rally when he was Principal at Olentangy High School near Columbus, now hangs in the CEO’s office in Cleveland, a constant reminder, Gordon says, to think of what students and families want first.

Also in the large, “anything-but-stuffy” CEO’s office in Cleveland is a blow-up mannequin—a replica of the artistic image created by Norwegian Symbolist painter Edvard Munch in his famous painting titled, “The Scream.” Around the neck of the inflated vinyl figure, whose grimaced scream is manifest, are numerous state and national conference badges hanging by their strings.

“There are so many things that can distract us from time spent with

children,” he said. “No matter how important or valuable a conference or meeting is, it is also time when I am sitting and am not directly working with or affecting kids. It reminds me, every time that I return from a conference and hang another conference badge, to put that much energy into being with kids, too.”

One other piece of memorabilia made its way to the CEO’s office from Eric Gordon’s former space in the academic wing of the administration building on East 6th Street. The keepsake, perhaps more than any other in his office, sums up the challenges he faces as CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The black and white print, originally the cover of a greeting card sent to Gordon years ago, is a photo-enhanced rendering of a shark plowing through concrete.

“Someone once told me I couldn’t do something, but against the odds, I found a way to do it,” he said. “When I got this card, I framed it so I would always be reminded that, with the right amount of determination and with hard work and effort, you can do anything. No matter how hard it is, WE CAN do this work.”



CEO Eric S. Gordon: Changing more than CMSD’s schools, redefining urban school leadership

When the Cleveland Board of Education announced its decision in June, 2011, to appoint Eric Gordon as the district’s new CEO, the news was met with audible gasps of surprise in the packed board room, then immediately after, with applause and sighs of relief.

“Yes!” shouted one citizen activist that attends every school board meeting. “It just makes so much sense.” Her sentiments were echoed at the former Chief Academic Officer’s first meeting as CEO of Cleveland’s public schools. Teachers and staff rose to their feet for a standing ovation as Eric Gordon approached the podium.

“At last,” was a common phrase when staff, parents and citizens were asked by local media about the promotion of the CAO to the position of CEO. “It’s about time they picked one of our own!” One of our own, for them, was someone not just from

Cleveland, but from within the ranks of CMSD leadership.

In the weeks that followed, Gordon moved smoothly from a smaller office on the sixth floor of the downtown administration building to a larger office on the third floor, handling an onslaught of media with questions about closed schools, new schools opening, about one list of teachers being recalled and another of those being laid off, and new report card results. Now, after a full year as CEO, many wonder how different the 2011-2012 school year might have been in Cleveland, if one of the three finalists for the CEO position—all outsiders to the district, (two from other states) – had actually been chosen.

Gordon had been a chief architect of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District’s 5-year Academic Transformation Plan, heralded as a top-to-bottom, building-by-building



Eric S. Gordon, CEO Cleveland Metropolitan School District

Appointed CEO (June, 2011)

*Cleveland’s Chief Academic Officer
(2007-2011)*



CEO Gordon:

- Implemented a 5-year Academic Transformation Plan (2010)
- Developed a 3-year academic improvement model
- Significantly reduced serious safety incidents, suspensions and expulsions in schools
- Increased student attendance
- Increased achievement test scores
- Attained the highest report card graduation rate in district history
- Former administrator in Toledo and Olentangy, a suburb of Columbus
- Previously taught in New Orleans and Toledo Public Schools

blueprint for school reform that was now in its second year. Looming in the months ahead was Mayor Jackson's *Plan for Transforming Cleveland's Schools*, calling for a dramatic overhaul of outdated contract and legislative language that posed long-standing barriers to school reform. If there was ever a time for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District to select "one of its own," the time had come.

"In talking with and interviewing highly qualified candidates from other districts, it made us more aware of how much innovation we'd really done in the last five years in Cleveland," said Cleveland School Board President Denise Link. "We needed someone to take that progress to the next level, and it became more and more clear there was no one better to do it than the one who brought us here."

Link said the Board decided to consider appointing Eric Gordon after interviewing the top three finalists whose experience in other districts was impressive, but who never appeared to the school board to be "the right fit" for Cleveland.

Gordon's selection also won the approval of Cleveland Mayor, Frank G. Jackson, the only Mayor in the

state of Ohio to be given control of a city school district.

"Our new CEO is focused on transforming the Cleveland Metropolitan School District step by step," said Jackson. "His experience, his focus on academics and his deep understanding of our district will help improve educational outcomes for every child."

Gordon has repeatedly called his appointment more than recognition of his qualification for the job. It is also, he says, an affirmation of the Board's and the Mayor's support of the Academic Transformation Plan and of the hard work of the CMSD staff that is making it work.

"The community loudly told us they don't want another person to come into town with another plan. They just want their schools to get better," said Gordon. And under his leadership, Cleveland's public schools *are* getting better.

Despite Cleveland's status as an *Academic Watch* district, Ohio's state report card results in August, 2011, showed gains for the second straight year, with higher test scores, improved attendance and an increased graduation rate that, for Cleveland, represented an all-time high on a state report card



spanning 20 years. Also impressive has been the district's new and innovative schools ratings, with 100% of them rated *Continuous Improvement, Effective* or *Excellent*.

Gordon's appointment as CEO was also a vote of confidence in an academic plan already in place in Cleveland and a message to him that the district should proceed on course.

"One of the things we learned in our community profile was that the people of Cleveland want a superintendent, not a CEO," said Gordon. "They want an academician or an academic leader over what has been perceived as a business model leader."

Gordon, who lives in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Cleveland, says his selection as CEO was less about appointing a new school leader and more about appointing a candidate with a commitment to Cleveland, to its children and to what good schools can do for the city.

"Even though my predecessors were all educators, it is rare that an academic officer is promoted to superintendent in large districts," said Gordon. "My appointment made it clear that, in Cleveland, academic leadership is what this city wants and needs."

Serena Houston-Edwards, who since the age of 16 worked in Cleveland's public schools as an aide, as a teacher and as a principal before becoming one of four Academic Superintendents, says Gordon brought to the superintendent's

office the best of what she has seen in previous CEOs.

"He knows that facilitating academic growth for children means simultaneously investing in the professional growth of the adults that serve them," said Edwards. "He is the first I've seen that truly knows the value of investing time and resources for both."

The difference between Gordon and CEO's before him, she says, is apparent to all who see him in his new role in meetings and in schools throughout the district.

In the CEO's meeting room, where Gordon's executive cabinet meetings are held, the walls that previously bore conventional framed prints and stately paintings during previous administrations have been replaced with large white boards. Multi-colored scrawls chart a clear path on the boards to the challenges of the day: revenue sources, enrollment statistics and marketing strategies, to name a few.

"The hardest part of my transition to the office of CEO has been that I truly love being engaged and actively involved," said Gordon, who fast became accustomed to planning academic strategies, only to watch his team go off to implement them, while he waits to see the results.

Gordon is happiest, he admits, when he is "with the kids," and his back-to-back schedule of appointments every day as CEO is due, in large part, to his continued presence in Cleveland's schools for some portion of each day on the job—a carryover commitment from his previous post.

"I've never been comfortable behind a desk, so I don't spend much time there," said Gordon, who unlike former CEOs in Cleveland, drives his own car, a choice that has been repeatedly mentioned by local media with playful jabs. The CEO also answers his own phone calls and responds to emails on the fly and in the middle of the night.

The simplicity with which Eric Gordon now leads the Cleveland Metropolitan School District is



matched only by the no-frills contract he negotiated with the Board that promoted him. The agreement did not include benefits awarded to previous CEOs and Superintendents in Cleveland, including a retirement pickup, auto allowance, driver and security service and reimbursement for annuity payments.

The CEO's salary and benefits contract produced a savings of \$95,000 over the one awarded to Gordon's predecessor and was as much a no-frills package as the leadership style he brought to the CEO's office.

Cleveland's down-to-earth school leader is accustomed to rolling up his sleeves and helping, and the new image continues to bring smiles to students Gordon personally registers for school and to whom he personally passes out school supplies and materials at community events.

In his first year as CEO, Gordon was seen frequently at street festivals, school events and community fairs, passing out enrollment fliers, dressed in shorts and a CMSD t-shirt, apparel that many consider unusual for the top executive of a large public school system.



"I learned as a principal in Toledo that during times when I wore a polo shirt and slacks, I was seen as more approachable to the community than when I wore a suit and tie," said Gordon, who laughed as he recalled administrators in his career who disagreed.

"A photo of me once ended up in the local paper, and I got in trouble for not wearing a tie," he recalled.

